

50 years in Irish botany: memory & anticipation

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I start by thanking the Irish Committee for honouring me by the invitation to speak. I owe it, I suppose, to my having joined the Society within a year or so of the Irish Branch's formation. I greet my fellow veterans, and add a special word of thanks to my old teacher Richard (Bud) McMullen for his encouragement and kindness down the years.

Last year marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Irish Branch of the BSBI. The early 1960s was a time of hope and détente: there was a feeling that the Cold Wars of the past were coming to an end. On the smaller stage, the Irish BSBI saw Planter and Gael, North and South coming together with a common purpose. These strands were represented by some remarkable personalities: Professor David Webb, of Trinity College Dublin, with his loud laugh and commanding presence - a touch of Anglo-Irish grandeur; Father John J. Moore, Jesuit and lecturer at University College Dublin, with his quaint, soft-spoken manner (he played a significant role as apostle of phytosociology to the English-speaking world); Miss Pat Kertland, a blunt, forceful Ulsterwoman, for many years Editor of the Irish Naturalists' Journal; and Maura Scannell of the National Herbarium, a tireless correspondent and a great nurturer of youthful talent.

My introduction to this brave new world was on the Junior Field Meeting held in summer 1964 in Connemara. This was a wonderful experience for me: finding oneself, for the first time ever, in a group of fellow plant enthusiasts. One was not alone – a botanical 'coming out'! (Coincidentally, my cousin Sylvia was there as well; she has put on display some evocative mementoes of the occasion). On one day a priest in a black leather jacket sped up on a motor-bike – that was JJ Moore. On another day, a wild-haired man in blue jeans drove up; until then, 'Webb' had been just a book to me.



David Webb botanizing on a Kerry hillside, ca. 1981. Photo: D. Kelly.



Junior Field Meeting heading out of Roundstone Harbour, Summer 1964. Extreme left: Terry Keatinge; centre seated: Father J. J. Moore; back right: Peter Hunt (meeting leader); 3rd from right: Daniel Kelly. Photo: S. Reynolds (née O'Brien).

The Irish Branch grew, and its activities diversified. Field meetings were organised across the island: some in hotspots of diversity, some in places where we boldly went because no botanist had gone before – or if they had, they had not filled in a recording card. Recording schemes were central – with, at one point, a big wrench in changing from Webb’s extension of the British grid to the new Irish Grid. The second edition of the BSBI Atlas (2002) was, for Ireland, a huge advance on the first, and a major achievement of the Society.



BSBI Meeting, Westmeath, ca. 1984. Left, Daniel Kelly and Con Breen (meeting leader); centre, Eimear Nic Lughadha (TCD Botany graduate 1987); right, Declan Doogue (TCD Botany Ph.D. 1994).

The number of Vice-County Recorders grew gradually: we have reached the stage where nearly every VC has its own Recorder, instead of one person having responsibility for half a province or more. New county floras began to appear. Evelyn Booth’s *Flora of Co. Carlow*, published in 1979, was the first for Ireland in 29 years. This was followed by the *Flora of Connemara and the Burren* in 1983, the new Flora of the North-East of Ireland in 1992 and the new *Flora of County Dublin* in 1998. In this century we have already had the first-ever Floras of the counties of Cavan, Waterford, Tyrone, Fermanagh and most recently Limerick. We have also had Tony O’Mahony’s *Wild flowers of Cork city & county* and other Floras of a more local nature.

I don't want to suggest all has been plain sailing. Numbers have been slow to build up – though the present signs of growth are most heartening. The link with the Universities has diminished as, sadly, knowledge of plants has sunk down and down in the priorities of the Powers That Be. Irish Botany has known its share of strife. Conflict is part of life, but I do think that some of the conflicts of past decades have been unnecessarily damaging. The poet Cowper once wrote “The spleen is seldom felt where FLORA reigns”; I have to wonder what botanical circles did he move in... Conflict resolution is a difficult art, and one that we in Ireland still need to work on.

Looking ahead, I see a burgeoning of activity. Take *Irish Botanical News*: some of the contributions are simply awe-inspiring. Look at ‘*Recording in Wexford*’ by Paul Green: “Another very successful year, with over 20,000 records collected”. Look at Tony O’Mahony’s ‘*Report on the Flora of Cork*’: it spans ten-and-a-half pages even though, as he writes, illness had “virtually brought fieldwork to a standstill” for the first half of the year!

But, as Maria Long emphasises in her article ‘Reaching Out’, **we must recruit**. In particular, we must keep bringing in the younger folk. The Junior Field Meeting of 50 years ago has not been repeated. Why not? (What did we do?!) Is this just too much to take on? Why not at least one Youth meeting in each year’s programme, if only for a day trip? And, as Robert Northridge has said, we need to make more of a forum for beginners and for younger members in our publications. Getting material into a state fit for publication is a daunting task, and fora like *Irish Botanical News*, *Irish Naturalists’ Journal* and *BSBI News* can provide a training-ground. There is never a shortage of things for budding botanists to do – even without *Atlas 2020* looming on the horizon.

Peering into the future entails the question: “What are we trying to achieve?” Identifying plants is a challenge, and a real skill. But lists of names are only a beginning. We must get to **know** our plants: what they tell us about the habitat; what their role is in the ecosystem. Take, for instance, the ‘Irish Species Project’, outlined by John Faulkner in the current *Irish Botanical News*. We have just eight ‘distinctive and appealing’ species to track down over two field seasons. Here is an example of where we might go the extra mile without becoming overwhelmed. The core of what is being asked for is straight population biology. What is the density and extent of each population? That is already a big advance on being just another tick on a list. The questions ripple out from there. **What is the plant up to?** Does it spread by seeds, or vegetatively, or both? How does it get dispersed? Is it, in fact, regenerating? Is the population expanding, stable or declining? What is eating them? What is

pollinating them? To quote the great Naturalist John Muir, “When one tugs at a single thing in Nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world”.

Finally, let it not all be busy-ness. Action should lead to contemplation. Let us give ourselves time to contemplate our plants: each species, in its uniqueness.

The fascination of our subject is endless. Long may our Society flourish!



**BSBI meeting on a classic Irish summer day in the Galty Mountains, 2008.
3rd and 4th from L: Sylvia Reynolds & Alan Craig (both TCD Botany graduates of 1967).**